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ABSTRACT

The reason for the huge surge in classes taught by graduate students is financial: their services are cheaper than those of "regularly qualified instructors." Recent critics have complained that the high percentage of classes taught by graduate students is a major act of fraud by universities and has contributed greatly to educational decline. They claim the lack of experience, training, and knowledge makes graduate students much less capable than full time faculty. However, studies show that there is a lack of data supporting the notion that age has a negative impact on instructor credibility. In fact, teaching assistants have been found to have equal or sometimes higher ratings than full time faculty. Graduate students often exhibit the important traits of warmth, support, and involvement with students. Because communication instructors are concerned with the many students who experience speaking anxiety, teachers must be approachable and helpful, characteristics associated with teaching assistants more than with full time faculty. A valid concern with regard to teaching assistants, however, is classroom control and discipline, but studies indicate that here too graduate students are effective. Instead of branding teaching assistants as fakes or impostors, they should be recognized for their positive characteristics and thought of as novices who require closer mentoring and assistance, but who often do a very satisfactory job. (Seventeen footnotes are attached). (HB)

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Keeping the Faith: Teaching Assistants and the Pursuit of Teaching Excellence

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Graduate teaching assistants are often the salt of the earth. Each Fall they eagerly advance upon new classes with the enthusiasm characteristic of a fresh convert. Unfortunately they are now being implicated in the latest series of arguments launched against higher education.

Before going into the specifics of the charge it would be instructive to take a brief look at the motivations and growth of graduate teaching assistantships. Who among us would be surprised if finances were not a strong force? Charles Kraus, in his "The Evolution of the American Graduate School" noted, "...the undergraduate school was able to obtain greater amount of service per dollar from graduate students than from regularly qualified instructors."[1] With the causal factors now in place let's look at the National Center for Educational Statistics for the effect. It noted that resident degree-credit college enrollment rose from 3.2 million in 1959-60 to 12.1 million in 1980-81. At the same time the number of "part-time, junior instructional staff" went from 32,000 to 140,000.[2] It is important to recognize that the rate of growth for junior staff exceeds the rate of growth for students. If that is the response of higher education in times of growth one can see the same financial motivations at work in times of retrenchment. Graduate teaching assistants are both

numerous and necessary in academe.

As mentioned earlier, graduate teaching assistants and those who employ them are part of a new scrutiny that has not been flattering. Martin Anderson, a former professor at Columbia University and a current fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University published a notable book entitled Impostors in the Temple. Professor Anderson's book (and numerous popular press articles) allege a series of problems in higher education. One facet that is drawing attention is Anderson's contention that graduate teaching assistants are part of a "bait and switch scheme." Anderson uses the University of California at Berkeley as an example of his charge. He quotes the undergraduate catalog and its laudatory comments on quality faculty then discloses the fact that graduate teaching assistants are responsible for 58% of the lower division class meetings.[3] Many of those familiar with higher education, especially at large state supported institutions, recognize that Anderson's figures regarding the percentage of student credit hours generated by graduate teaching assistants is typical.

Professor Anderson believes that graduate teaching assistants lack the background, training, and knowledge to teach on the college level. He feels this is more than neglect and links the practice to fraud. Anderson states,

"Undergraduates are cheated of the quality education they have bought and paid for."[4] The persuasive imagery gets no nicer when Anderson laments the fact that while children having children is regrettable, "children teaching children is unconscionable."[5]

If Anderson uses the imagery of impostors and temples in his charges then similar imagery may be helpful in refutation. What the good professor from Stanford may need to envision is not the use of children as teachers but rather the academic equivalent of a novice. Novices are fresh and energetically faithful. The error in Anderson's argument is that he confuses young with incompetent and he mistakes new for ineffective. What needs to be addressed is how graduate teaching assistants go about their work. What needs to be examined are the reviews and studies of the work performed by GTAs.

There are studies done in the field of psychology that permit a different interpretation than that of Professor Anderson. Harold Schuckman, writing in 1990, indicated that from his studies of faculty and graduate teaching assistants that there was a lack of information to support the notion that age has a negative impact on teaching assistant credibility.[6] Schuckman's work displayed that students found faculty knowledgeable but found that graduate

teaching assistants were credited with being more "tolerant and helpful."[7] Even more to the point when answering Anderson's charges of graduate teaching assistants in lower level courses was Schuckman's finding that graduate teaching assistants ratings were equivalent to full time faculty except in introductory courses where the GTAs had higher ratings.[8]

Implicit in Martin Anderson's position is the idea that scholarly experience on the part of the instructor is the sine qua non of a quality education. There is no denying that time and effort spent in scholarly pursuits arms an individual with material that is beneficial in the classroom. There are, however, other aspects of the learning process that need to be addressed.

In their 1990 study on student perceptions of teacher sex roles, Jordan, McGreal, and Wheeless discovered that instructors exhibiting characteristics of warmth, support, and involvement were perceived as highly credible and effective in promoting interaction in the classroom and increasing student-teacher rapport.[9] The conclusions here are not ones that are closed to relatively young graduate teaching assistants. In fact, one may argue that warmth, support and interaction may be assisted by the demographic similarities between the students and the typical graduate

teaching assistant. Affective learning is enhanced through interaction and rapport offers the opportunity to explore course content. The implications of this position are sustained in the work of Elmore and Pohlmann who studied personal characteristics and course evaluations. They found teacher warmth to be an important variable influencing student rating of teacher effectiveness. Encouraging student's participation in class, showing interest in the learners, asking if students understood, and making oneself available and approachable outside of class were found to be the highest indicators of teacher warmth as perceived by students.[10] Clearly, both professor and graduate teaching assistant are capable of all these behaviors but the professor must balance them with research and service obligations.

Those of us concerned with communication instruction must keep in mind the need to reduce student speaking anxiety. Here the need to be approachable and helpful is essential to course material. Kearney and McCroskey found that those instructors perceived to be highly accessible, self-disclosive, and open in their interactions with students, may also be contributing to reducing student anxieties about communication, while also promoting student affective and behavioral commitment.[11] Remember

Schuckman's finding mentioned above, i.e., graduate teaching assistants were found to be "more tolerant and helpful." In this instance it may be argued that GTAs are uniquely qualified to handle the problems associated with some types of communication anxiety.

Another area to be addressed when evaluating a new graduate teaching assistant is that of classroom control. Anderson makes a specific point of criticizing the disciplinary potential of a GTA when he characterizes him or her as being a "beer drinking buddy."[12] While this may be an exercise in hyperbole for Professor Anderson, concerns about graduate teaching assistants and class control are valid. In studies dealing with behavioral alteration techniques (BATS) and immediacy the instructor's level of experience had no bearing on the results.[13] In another study by K. David Roach it was found that GTAs use more BATS than experienced instructors. In fact, Roach discovered that new and experienced instructors both frequently used the same pro-social techniques.[14] Problems with "power" in the classroom are understandable when considering graduate teaching assistants but this research indicates that GTAs have a firm grasp on motivating students to perform task behaviors by using effective behavior alteration techniques. It would seem logical that graduate teaching assistants who

are often closer in age and interests to students would be seen as more immediate.

The case against the graduate teaching assistant appears to be eminently defensible. GTAs are perceived as more helpful that regular faculty, seen as warm and immediate in the classroom, have special abilities in lowering apprehension, and can control their classroom. As mentioned earlier these women and men are not part of some impostor regime but rather new and growing members of the profession. Please permit the ecclesiastical motif to continue. The term "novice" should be used instead of a fake. If that is true then the procedures and practices of a novitiate should apply. And perhaps Anderson's salvos should cause us to reflect on how we treat our novices. Do those of us in higher education insist on a systematic and thorough course of training for our novices? Do we provide the novices with the materials, insights, and time to learn the task? Researchers confirm what we all hope for, that teaching assistants with more pre-classroom training displayed less anxiety and greater effectiveness than those with little training.[15] Unfortunately, universities do not always give adequate training. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported a study in which over 600 graduate students stated that their training was inadequate.[16] This

is especially frightening because few universities look for prior teaching experience or course work when selecting graduate teaching assistants.[17] Unless and until all graduate teaching assistants are provided with thorough training we not will be safe against future charges of "impostor."

1. Charles Kraus, "The Evolution of the American Graduate School," AAUP Bulletin 37:3 (Autumn 1951) : 501-2.

2. National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics, 1983-84 (Washington, D.C. United States Government Printing Office, December 1983), p. 101-103.

3. Martin Anderson, "What! Me Teach? I'm a Professor." Wall Street Journal Sept 8,1992: p. A 16 (E) col. 3.

4. Martin Anderson, "Are we being cheated by our universities?," St.Petersburg Times, August 30, 1992, p.D4.

5. Ibid.

6. Harold Schuckman, "Students' Perceptions of Faculty and Graduate Students as Classroom Teachers," Teaching of Psychology, Vol 17, October, 1990, p. 162-165.

7. Ibid. p. 163.

8. Ibid, p.164.

9. Felecia F. Jordan, Elizabeth A. McGreal, and Virginia Eman Wheeless, "Student Perceptions of Teacher Sex-Role Orientation and Use of Power Strategies and Teacher Sex as Determinants of Student Attitude Toward Learning." Communication Quarterly 38 (1990): 43-53.

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11. Patricia Kearney and James McCroskey, "Relationship Among Teacher Communication Style, Trait and State Communication Apprehension and Teacher Effectiveness." Communication Yearbook 4 (1980) p. 533-550.

12. Anderson, St. Petersburg Times, 30 August 1992, p. D4.

13. Patricia Kearney, Timothy G. Plax, and Nancy F. Burroughs, An Attributional Analysis of College Students' Resistance Decisions. ERIC 1991 ED 334 613.

14. K. David Roach, "Graduate Teaching Assistants' Use of Behavior Alteration Techniques in the University Classroom." Communication Quarterly, 39, NO2 (Spring 1991) p. 178-188.

15. Linda S. Williams, "The Effects of a Comprehensive Teaching Assistant Training Program on Teaching Anxiety and Effectiveness." Research in Higher Education Vol 32 November 1991.

16. Paul D. Travers, "Better Training for Teaching Assistants" Journal of Advertising Vol 37 (1992) p. 147-149.

17. Nancy L. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Pamela L. Gray, "Graduate Teaching Assistant Training in Speech Communication and Noncommunication Departments: A National Survey." Communication Education 39 (1990) p. 292-305.